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A Light in the Dark

I received a mentor assignment for my ambulatory care clerkship a few weeks before I began the second half of clerkship year. Unlike most other rotations in which students report to residents, our ambulatory care rotation pairs students directly with faculty members who they work closely with over the month. Interacting with authority figures had never been my forté, so needless to say, I was nervous.

The assignment came at an important time. Although I had loved the first year and a half of medical school, the initial six months of clerkship year had been some of my most difficult yet. I was struggling to keep my morale high amidst the constant “self-evaluations” and “feedback Fridays” (as they were called at my school, a little too fondly) which often led me into a spiral of self-critique. The constant barrage of

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questions from my superiors (which I almost never answered correctly) left me feeling unprepared and under-qualified almost all of the time. I had always considered myself an outstanding student, but I couldn't help but feel lost in the crowd, outshined by other students. I had entered medical school with a passion for women's health and a plan to pursue Ob/Gyn, but I had felt unhappy and listless on a recent rotation. I felt further from deciding on a specialty than I had at the start of medical school, which caused me to even wonder if medicine was really the right profession for me.

The first day I went to meet Dr. U, I was confronted with a serious-looking older woman with a definite air of strictness about her. She was an anomaly in the primary care clinic of our busy city hospital, which was mostly run by residents and early-career faculty who had not yet traded in this taxing job for the comfort of a private office. I could immediately see that we would be an unlikely pair, and not just because of our generation gap. She was dressed in a perfectly ironed skirt and matching stockings; at the time I didn't own a single pair of pantyhose without runs in them. On my first day I learned that she was raised in a affluent town on the East Coast; I had grown up in a bustling joint family halfway across the world in Karachi, Pakistan. She frequently lectured her patients about the need for two cups of yoghurt per day to maintain calcium levels; I rarely ate breakfast and kept a constant supply of candy stored in my pantry. Despite these differences, I felt an inexplicable connection with this woman with whom I seemingly

had little in common, and I had a feeling we would become friends.

The next few weeks were some of the most productive during my clerkship year. Dr. U and I put together a learning plan for me, an assignment that other mentors had blown off, and we worked diligently to achieve these goals. Together, we decided to tackle some difficult and often ignored topics in medicine: the breast exam, thyroid exam and women's bone disease. We saw patients together and, instead of testing my knowledge (pimping, the anxiety-provoking teaching technique I had become more than familiar with during my previous clerkships), she asked my opinion about topics and listened to my answers intently. I found myself feeling motivated by my own interest, rather than by fear and anxiety, to go home and read about the topics I encountered in the clinic. Medicine was becoming interesting again.

An otherwise reserved and highly professional woman, Dr. U started opening up to me about challenges she had faced as a woman becoming a physician and difficulties she had overcome in her practice. She shared with me tricks and techniques to deal with difficult patients or trying conditions. I admired how she interacted with her patients - she was firm but kind. In one case, I recall a clinic visit with a young woman who was sexually active but did not want to become pregnant and shrugged off birth control. While other physicians might have quickly moved on, Dr. U proceeded to ask some critical and pointed questions of the woman. I respected her directness, the urgency with which she cared about her patients, while losing nothing in compassion.

My last day with Dr. U was bittersweet. Although I felt like I still had learning left to do and I wished this clerkship wasn't ending, I was also simply thankful to have met this wonderful woman and mentor. At our last meeting, she led me to the small kitchen in the back of the clinic and we discussed my

future plans over tea. She took my hand and told me the future was going to be hard sometimes and that I should not give up. Although this was a small gesture, it had a huge impact on someone who was feeling as unsure of themselves as I was at the time.

Before I met Dr. U, I was conscious of the fact that I had always had difficulty connecting with faculty members, and had not had someone I could call a true mentor until that time. In fact, I did not know what such a relationship really looked like. But meeting Dr. U taught me what a real mentor is; it is someone who believes in you, both personally and professionally, even when you might not believe in yourself. But there is more to it than this. To make a good pair, the mentor and mentee must "click", and, when they do, this beautiful spark can lead to a friendship that transcends age, culture and background.